

ETC



Herman de Vries: Chance & Change

John K. Grande

Number 78, June–July–August 2007

Écologie
Ecology (2)

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/35015ac>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (print)
1923-3205 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Grande, J. K. (2007). Herman de Vries: Chance & Change. *ETC*, (78), 12–15.



Herman de Vries, *What is rubbish?* Found collage. photo: Falko Behr.

HERMAN DE VRIES : CHANCE AND CHANGE

Herman de Vries's sense of a transcendent unity is both mystical and functional. Texts of Zen Buddhism and the Hindu verses of the Upanishads influenced his early artworks. In 1959 he made his first white painting. Trained as a scientist, de Vries worked as a researcher at the Institute of Applied Biology in Nature in Arnhem, Holland, until 1968. His artistic output in the 1960s was entirely separate from his scientific work, although the randomness and chance found in his art were encountered in the use of random number tables and the statistical design of biological experiments.

De Vries's belief in the capacity of art to communicate, and his sense of objectivity, led him to abandon the use of capital letters in his writing for a period of over 45 years. Herman de Vries's texts are never capitalized, as the hierarchy of words, language and structure is something he seeks to avoid. De Vries's installations often have a scientific or objective aspect to them and involve collecting elements, objects and plants. More recently, de Vries has presented a design for the development of the Weerribben nature reserve in the northwest Dutch province of Overijssel – a project that integrates various scientific disciplines, concrete art and philosophy. *Les très riches heures de Herman de Vries* was recently published by Twelve Bells Press as was a major monograph authored by Mel Gooding.

J. G. : *Moving from botany to art at the age of 40 is quite a transformation. What drove you to get into artmaking ?*

H. d. V. : I did research work on the biology and geographic distribution of mice and rats and their extermination there and was not satisfied with my scientific work. I felt it was incomplete in its approach towards reality. My first artwork was spontaneous abstract painting. Under the influence of Suzuki's books on Zen Buddhism, I reduced the colour and expressivity more and more – until I came to empty white paintings without any form. I also made collages. The beginnings of these were original : my fascination with the fragments that remained of advertisement walls in Paris. I was always playing with used, thrown away, weathered parts of reality found on roadsides, litter in the forest, and so on. There was a strong trend towards re-evaluating things that had lost all value – what is rubbish ?

J. G. : *You created works that involve a musical component early on, didn't you ?*

H. d. V. : Yes. It began in 1962 and '63 with bird voices, recorded with a large 100-centimetre parabolic microphone I borrowed from the Institute of Applied Biological Research in Nature. In the morning, at about 4:30 a.m., I would record them in a place with many gardens, bordering a large forest region. It was in fact a kind of "zero work" – no composition, no selection, just recordings. These re-

cordings were reality-music : "*natura artis magistra*," a title derived from the full 19th-century name of the Amsterdam Zoo, usually called *artis*. The next tape I made was "*humanae vitae*" in 1963 at a busy street corner (with traffic lights) during the morning rush hour, when people go to work, and trucks are entering and leaving the city. Later, in the early 1970s, I recorded six little waterfalls in a small brook. The waterfall phenomenon had fascinated me for a long time as it is always the same water in the same stream, but it manifests itself differently under different conditions. At the time, I could sit for hours in the proximity of little falls, contemplating their reality/actuality. It parallels other processes and lives. Later on I added other water sounds such as rain, coastal breakers, surf, the sound of dripping water in a small forest spring – produced in a record as "Water : The Music of Sound." It was all an expression of our reality, and there was nothing to add, nothing to change – complete information and poetry, perfect.

J. G. : *Your use of water as a component of your work, recording the sound of streams and movement of water, was truly breakthrough material in nature-art interaction. Again, with your "real works," reality is reified : Nature is an active participant in the process.*

H. d. V. : Water is in all and everything that is alive. The sound of a brook, the sound of six miniature waterfalls – each has a different sound and a different identity. Each is formulated by different circumstances, under different conditions, but still it is the same stream, the same water ! I will only exhibit what I have seen, found and collected. So the work is from nature, and the role I play in *my* works is modest. It is simply a presentation of these facts, of the result of processes, of the "process."

J. G. : *The artifacts series you produced from the 1990s approach the object as part of a process of rediscovery and reclamation. Books found under a hedge covered with moss, for*

instance. Your art remind us that rather than seeing matter as part of an ontological process, we often see it as an extension of production systems. The process is more complex and causes us to reflect on nature's omnipresent role in the total environment of contemporary life, whether it be product, architecture, or nature.

H. d. V. : Entropy doesn't stop. It is in nature and in our cultural domain. In our man-made world, the laws of nature still rule ! It is important to bring together our different attitudes about recognition and knowledge collecting, and unite them. Science and art, art and science. They are two boulevards of our creative approach towards reality. Actuality. In the Sanctuaire de la Nature de Roche Rousse there is a fence that surrounds a ruined house, already taken over by nature. Rose bushes and a box tree (*buxus*) grow inside what remains of the walls. It shows how humanity is transitory, a part of nature. We can respect and enjoy the power of nature – always ready to heal her wounds, overtaking what humanity has left behind, forgotten or destroyed.

J. G. : *When we define and segregate elements, whether it be trash or a new product, we are willing participants in a process of overproduction. We have become afraid of recognizing nature as anything more than a resource. When nature is manipulated or altered, we believe it has value. What a conditioned paradox !*

H. d. V. : What a conditioned paradox indeed ! Scientists have participated in this exploitation. Science is no longer a way of gathering knowledge or a base for philosophy, but mainly a base for exploitation, for being useful, in this way. Much of the "advancement" of science is a degradation. Often, the scientist has become a slave of "progress," and works for shareholders.

J. G. : *The sanctuaries you have created – a circular wrought-iron fence in Stuttgart (1993), the circular brick structure at Munster (1997), the open meadow at Eschenau, the path*



ambulo ergo sum

through the Bois Sacré around the Sanctuaire de la Nature de la Roche Rousse (2001-07) – rekindle this notion of a private place where we can go to reflect and identify with our primordial roots in nature. Nature is often perceived as material whose sole potential involves exploitation. Inner reflections about our origins, indeed nature's origins, raise existential questions about the great divide between humanity and nature. Are we participating in a process of development and change decided by a mindset established centuries ago ?

H. d. V. : One of the originators of that mindset was René Descartes (1596-1650), who laid the foundations for mechanistic philosophy, which so strongly influenced the developing sciences. It is still being worked out in our times. Descartes's line "*cogito ergo sum*" ("I think therefore I am") was opposed by his contemporary Gassendi (1592-1655), who lived in Digne, a town close to Roche Rousse, and who countered: "*ambulo ergo sum*" ("I walk therefore I am").

People walking up the footpath to the Sanctuaire de la Nature de la Roche Rousse will find this Gassendi quote cut into the surface of a rock, that once fell from a ridge, beside the path. The idea of sanctuaries and Bois Sacré is of a place meant for reflection, revelation and contemplation amid nature's manifestations. A circular earthen wall, densely covered with wild roses surrounds it. The *hortus liberatus* in Merzig, Germany, and our "meadow" near our village of Eschenau, which we will give back to nature, also have to do with these ideas.

J. G. : You have been involved in redesigning a section of land into a nature reserve in the freshwater wetlands and marsh area called Weerribben, in the northwest Dutch province of Overijssel. Some areas of this preserve will have space for contemplation. In other areas the water level has been raised closer to its natural levels. It's a very real example of how artists can make a difference in the real world.

H. d. V. : The transformation of six square kilometres of agricultural land below sea level into wetland nature was, of course, not possible without biological, historical and hydrological research. Plant sociology and the succession of plant associations I have studied are particularly important to integrating a successful, variable transition between the two existing nature reserves there. It is accessible by canoe and footpath and for people who seek an experience of deep nature in Holland, a densely populated country. Some parts will be reserved for nature itself. No visitors will be allowed entrance, not even scientists.

J. G. : More recently, you have been integrating quotes in the landscape on rocks faces in the Steigerwald and Réserve Géologique de Vries. Can you tell me about some of these ?

H. d. V. : Texts on rocks and forgotten quarries are texts that have to do with nature and actual reality. Some are old, very old, some in old languages, some by philosophers, some of my own. They are short or very short, cut in stone and plated with gold leaf.

J. G. : Is there ever a danger of overpopulating a landscape with signs and symbols ? How does one achieve a balance between the nature as sanctuary and the interventions we undertake ?

H. d. V. : Of course there is a danger of overpopulating a landscape with signs. Interventions in nature should be done with utmost care, and I see a lot of art done in nature that I abhor ! These texts are three centimetres high, some only two centimetres, and most are not easy to find. You have to try to find them. They are hidden. In the Steigerwald, there are about 26 over an area of about 200 square kilometres. In the province, there are about 20 (some more will be done) over a rugged area of 2000 square kilometres. They have to be discovered, and if you search for them without success, never mind : You have discovered many other aspects of nature that are at least as important as the art you were looking for. There is much serendipity in this project.

J. G. : Your latest publication, "*Les très riches heures de Herman de Vries*," includes a photo essay taken in nature over a period of four hours. This is a direct exchange between self and other, nature integration.

H. d. V. : *Les très riches heures de Herman de Vries* is a book of 131 pictures/photos, taken at one small spot, where I was sitting on the ground, photographing everything that captured my attention for four hours. It's an essay on identity, on unity, about an individual (me) and his (my) world. It's also about fullness of experience in nature. The title comes from the 15th-century manuscript book *Les très riches heures du Duc de Berry*, with its 131 miniature paintings. I have prepared a new small publication, now in print in England (Twelve Bells Press – Christopher Morton), which has photos of myself and what I looked at; dwelling upon the following

to be this
what i see
i am
i am this
i am here



Herman de Vries, *Sanctuarium*, Muenster, 1997.

i am
where; dwell

AN INTERVIEW BY JOHN K. GRANDE

John K. Grande's *Art Nature Dialogues : Interviews with Environmental Artists* was published by State University of New York Press in 2004 and in a Spanish edition by the Fundación Manrique in 2005. Other publications include *A Biomass Continuity* (a collaboration with Coco Gordon (Go If Press) and *In Memory of the World* (Go If, 2006). John Grande's *Dialogues in Diversity : Art from Marginal to Mainstream* will be published by Pari, in Italy, in 2007.